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## ***The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Birth Dearth*: Prophecy, Prescription and Public Policy**

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*"Six children (are) the minimum number of people of 'normal' stock; those of better stock should have more."*

Theodore Roosevelt, 1907

*"As that great author and scientist, Mr. Brisbane, has pointed out, what every woman ought to do is have six children."*

Sinclair Lewis, 1935

*"There is nothing to compare to the joy of having six children. If every American family did that, we'd certainly have the greatest nation in the world."*

Phyllis Schlafly, 1987<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

This paper deals with two recent works on the politics of reproduction: *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, and *The Birth Dearth*, by Ben Wattenberg.<sup>2</sup> Since the former is an imaginative work by a popular novelist and the latter is a research report by a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, one might assume that they would have little in common. In fact, however, these two books provide some direct, and often disturbing, points of comparison.

Both, for example, first address the reader with a selection from the Book of Genesis. Wattenberg's choice is from Book 1, Chapter 28: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. . .". Wattenberg does not dwell upon this specific scriptural imperative, but human reproduction, and the need for much more of it in contemporary America, is the theme of his book. *The Birth Dearth* consists of three major parts, all laden with demographic and other data. In the first part, Wattenberg documents (and deplores) what he calls America's "fertility free-fall," a recent sharp decline in the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) below the population replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. In the second part, Wattenberg offers his explanations for the "birth dearth," and outlines what he considers to be its most alarming economic,

geopolitical, and personal consequences. Finally, Wattenberg suggests a long list of possible pro-natalist remedies for this present-day problem and impending crisis.

Atwood's scriptural epigram is both lengthier and more specifically woven into her study. Indeed, the following Biblical episode becomes both *raison d'être* and central ritual in the 21st century political system she posits:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis 30: 1-3)

Justifying their coup primarily by an acute birth dearth, fundamentalists have seized power and established the Republic (but actually the monotheocracy) of Gilead. The governing patriarchy, consisting of Commanders, has forced all women into rigidly stratified and socially useful functions. There are Wives, physically sterile but socially prominent women, who serve the Commander husbands as hostesses and household managers; Marthas, who do the cooking and cleaning; and Aunts, who run the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers in which women who have viable ovaries (that is, have given birth previously) and are "available" (divorcees, those married to a divorced man, widows, or those deliberately widowed by the state) are trained to become proper Handmaids.

Handmaids, such as the novel's narrator Offred (literally of Fred, the Commander to whom she is assigned) have only one function, which is to reproduce. As Offred wryly notes, she and her sister Handmaids are women of "reduced circumstances" (p. 8), reduced that is to being nothing more than "two-legged wombs" (p. 136). Because their fecundity is so vital to national survival, the Handmaids are well-fed, relieved of all laborious work, and protected from every physical danger. They are also, however, "protected" from many other ordinary activities which Offred, too late, realizes had been central to her previous happiness: reading; paid work; discussions of current events; privacy (as opposed to solitude); friendship (as opposed to a sterile "sisterhood"); and love (as opposed to enforced breeding).



During a Handmaid's period of maximum fertility, she is "serviced" by her Commander while lying between the spread legs of the Commander's Wife, a strange, but strangely non-sexual arrangement. If sperm meets seed, there is an elaborate birthing ceremony nine months later in which the Handmaid delivers upon the Wife's welcoming knees. If repeated attempts at conception are unsuccessful, or the resulting children repeatedly born dead or deformed, the Handmaid is eventually exiled to third world colonies, to sweep up toxic wastes. In Gilead, a literal interpretation has been given to Rachel's, "Give me children, or else I die."

### **The Similarity of the Two Works**

Other than their genesis in Genesis, their central premise of a population shortfall, and their popularity (*The Handmaid's Tale* ran 36 weeks on the bestseller list, and a shortened and serialized version of *The Birth Dearth* was syndicated in many American newspapers), what do these two works have in common? First, both books are didactic, that is they were designed to be instructive. Wattenberg acknowledges at the outset that his book is both "a speculation and a provocation" (p. 1). It is his genuine fear about the consequences of the birth dearth which has propelled him, a self-described optimist, into writing this "alarmist tract" (p. 10). According to Wattenberg, the very survival of Western civilization is at stake, and he chastises both liberals and conservatives for their failure to come right out and say what Wattenberg thinks urgently needs to be said: American women should be having more babies.

Atwood is somewhat more reticent in acknowledging the instrumentality of her intentions. "This book won't tell you who to vote for," she has said. "I do not have a political agenda of that kind."<sup>8</sup> However, Atwood has long used her fiction for social criticism, and with specific reference to *The Handmaid's Tale* has observed that, "Speculative fiction is a logical extension of where we are now. I think this particular genre is a walking along of a potential road, and the reader as well as the writer can then decide if that is the road they wish to go on. Whether we go that way or not is going to be up to us."<sup>4</sup>

This leads to the second point of clear comparability between the two works. Both are projectionist: they are grounded in present events and trends which are at least suggestive of a possible future. Wattenberg's projections are based upon data and interpretations of data gathered from an impressive array of sources. Wherever he looks he finds evidence that in the "modern, industrial, free" nations (America, Canada, Western Europe,

Japan, Australia, and Israel), the TFR is well below replacement rates. In contrast, the population of the "Soviet bloc" (the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) will be increasing. Most alarming to Wattenberg, despite a "heartening" decline in Third World fertility, is that we are now

awash in the fruit of those TFR's in the six-plus range from a generation ago. Today there are 1.1 billion women of child-bearing age in the less-developed world! Even if those women reduce their fertility as the U.N. projects, there will be a flood of Third World babies, a real flood. Third World population which is now 3.7 billion persons, is slated to rise to over 8 billion people in the middle of the next century! (p. 44)

What concerns Wattenberg most deeply is that, if present reproductive trends continue, the Westernized nations will constitute only 9% of the world's population by 2025, down from 22% in 1950, and 15% now; and that 9% will not be enough to spread democratic values, technological advances, and economic benefits. Wattenberg ruefully notes, "Manifest destiny" was not the cry of a no-growth continent of old people" (p. 71).

Atwood's novel contains no charts and graphs. Like Wattenberg, however, it is obvious that she is a very close follower of current events, and from them she has gleaned a number of happenings and ideas which she has woven into a grim dystopia. In contemporary America, for example, abortion clinics have frequently been bombed and burned, and in Rumania, doctors performing abortions are now subject to 25 year's imprisonment or even death.<sup>5</sup> In her imagined Gilead, abortionists are executed and their bodies hung from hooks on The Wall, as a deterrent, or they are dismembered in gruesome "participation" ceremonies. In America, homosexuals are often subject to legal and social penalties; in Gilead, "gender treachery," being non-productive, is a capital offense. In the last few years, courts in at least eleven American states have ordered women, against their wishes, to submit to Caesarean-section surgery when doctors decided that conventional childbirth could harm the fetus, and there have been increasing instances of litigation by the state in behalf of "fetus patients" against the bearing mothers; in Gilead, Handmaids are nothing but fetus-bearing vessels and must sacrifice all personal choice and pleasure in the fetus' behalf.<sup>6</sup> As in Gilead, so in America today, many major U.S. companies bar under-45 women from certain jobs which might diminish their



fertility or damage a fetus; toxic wastes are increasingly being shipped to third world nations; pro-life forces have frequently held symbolic "funerals" for fetuses; and at least one state legislature has now required "dignified" burial or disposal of fetal remains.<sup>7</sup>

As Atwood has emphasized, while her novel is futuristic, it is not utterly fantastic. "There are no spaceships, no Martians, nothing like that," she has pointed out. In fact, when asked if Gilead could possibly happen here, she responds that some of it "is happening now," and that, "There is nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale*, with the exception of one scene, that has not happened at some point in history."<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, both Wattenberg and Atwood have looked closely at certain contemporary events and circumstances; have extrapolated these events into a highly undesirable future; and have written their books to alert readers to the dangers the authors see ahead. Since in some ways the "solutions" Wattenberg advocates are related to the dangers Atwood warns against, it is somewhat surprising to find as much agreement as there is between the two regarding the major factors which have depressed present birth rates.

### **Factors Producing the Birth Dearth**

Both Wattenberg, with long lists and charts, and Atwood, by indirection throughout the novel and in a "scholarly" appendix at the novel's end, suggest that among the factors producing the "baby bust" have been better contraceptive techniques, more education and higher income for females, delayed marriage, more frequent divorce, more abortions due to legalization, increased infertility, and more open homosexuality. Most interesting, however, is that both writers implicate, Wattenberg centrally, Atwood peripherally, the women's liberation movement as possibly pushing us into undesirable futures.

For Wattenberg, the cause and effect relationship is very clear and entirely adverse. According to his analysis, "One clear root thought of the original (women's liberation) movement was this: Marriage, raising a family, or a large family, was no longer necessarily considered to be the single most important thing in a woman's life" (p. 127). as he has written elsewhere,

About twenty years ago, corresponding almost exactly with the Birth Dearth — many women began to forge a new economic contract for themselves. They exchanged what anthropologists tell us was the original female contract — trading

childbearing capabilities for economic sustenance in the home — for a version of the male practice — trading physical and mental labor for economic sustenance in the market.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, women's liberation led to women in the workforce; and "working women," according to Wattenberg, are "probably the single most important factor" causing the birth dearth.<sup>10</sup>

Such generalizations may disturb at least some of Wattenberg's readers, and certainly his feminist ones. However, especially when the policy implications of Wattenberg's philosophy are being considered, it is good that he has made his central premises so plain. Wattenberg insists, for example, that he wants pro-natal policies which will expand rather than limit women's choices, and he suggests scores of possibilities. However, if "working women" are the "single greatest cause" of the birth dearth, it seems obvious that all solutions will be partial until women leave the workforce and reassume their "original contracts."

For Atwood, the line between contemporary women's liberation and future Gileadean oppression is much more circuitous. In the "old times" (which of course are our times), Offred was sufficiently "liberated" to have had a college degree, a job, and a lover who eventually became her husband. While she chose to have a child, many of her friends — working women who did not want the economic and other burdens of children, or who feared the fragility of the environment or the inevitability of nuclear catastrophe — did not. Others, due to the fertility-depressing and abortifacient effects of environmental pollutants, nuclear radiation and toxic wastes, could not conceive or bear a healthy child. Furthermore, the sexual freedom and excesses of the "old times" produced not only fertility-impeding sexually transmitted diseases, but an escalating atmosphere of contempt for and violence against women. Hence, among the chief demands of women's liberationists were increased respect for women and improved physical protection. Offred's own mother, she recalls, marched in demonstrations to "take back the night," enthusiastically participated in pornographic-book burnings, and often mouthed anti-male slogans ("A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women," etc.)

Society was "dying of too much choice," Offred recalls (p. 25).

Women were not protected then . . . Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, desires us



... There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it. (p.24)

Following an emotional birthing ceremony from which all males, all doctors, and all anaesthetics have been excluded, Offred utters one of the book's most poignant lines: "Mother, I think: Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (p. 127).

Atwood is a feminist, and the oppressions she describes can be much more clearly traced to the religious right than to the feminist left. Atwood's warning signals, however, are flashed at radical feminism as well as religious fundamentalism. Please remember, she seems to be saying, that the "protection" of women has always been the major justification for their oppression, and sometimes, however, unfortunately, one must choose between freedom from and freedom to. Or, as Offred's Commander reminds her, "Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some" (211).

As by now should be obvious, these two authors have written "message" books in order to convey diametrically different messages. Before further discussing those differences, however, one final similarity should be noted: both authors employ a very simple style to clothe a highly complex message.

For many readers and book reviewers, it is the prosaic, unemotional tone with which Offred relates the most degrading and horrifying arrangements that makes the book so deeply disturbing. Leaving a particicution ceremony, where the Handmaids have been emotionally stampeded into tearing an accused rapist apart with their bare hands, they wish each other the conventional, "You have a nice day" (281). Thoughts can quickly turn from death to dinner, from bodies hanging on The Wall to sundresses and ice-cream cones.

Oddly, while the novelist is presenting her grim forecast with restrained but imaginative force, it is the research fellow who hammers the reader with tones of breathless, desperate urgency. As the material already quoted indicates, Wattenberg's voice is shrill, over-wrought, semi-hysterical. His favorite punctuation is the exclamation point. And in his determination to persuade the widest possible audience, his words and sentences often go beyond the simple to the simplistic. In outlining possible economic incentives to produce additional offspring, for example,



Wattenberg holds out the promise of "a nice green check" (p. 154), "a green federal check" (p. 157), "a green Social Security check" (p. 157), and "real green cash money" (p. 158). "In a nonfree country," he lectures his apparently unsophisticated readers, "the ruler, or rulers, can sit down around a big table and make policy" (p. 143). One of his pieces of pictorial persuasion is a python (America) swallowing a pig (the post-World War II Baby Boom). Should the pictures not be sufficiently clear, Wattenberg supplies the sound effects: "Gobble, gobble, suck, suck" (p. 34).

### **The Differences Of The Two Works**

The following short excerpts, the first from Atwood, the second from Wattenberg, illustrate not only the unadorned style employed by each author, but the profoundly different assumptions and values they bring to their work. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred has been taken by her Commander to an illegal nightclub where the women are dressed in everything from chorus girls' shifts to old cheerleading costumes. Offred is dumfounded, amused, and wildly curious, but any display of emotions could be fatal. Hence, she warns herself, "All you have to do, I tell myself, is keep your mouth shut and look stupid. It shouldn't be that hard." (p. 236). In the penultimate paragraph in *The Birth Dearth*, Wattenberg summarizes his solution to the impending crisis as follows: "After all, it's not such a big deal. All it involves is having another baby." (p. 169).

The reader quickly realizes that Atwood's "all" reverberates with the irony of centuries. In two simple lines, the author has captured the conventional wisdom passed down to women, and keeping them down, through the ages: feign ignorance; do not ask questions; accept your lot; suffer in silence; what you don't know can't hurt you. In contrast, Wattenberg seems oblivious to the irony, and revolutionary implications, of his "all". Because women not only bear children, but generally have had the major responsibility for nurturing and raising them to adulthood, the ability to control one's reproductive choices is the *sine qua non* of woman's ability to live in relative freedom. Almost all of the advances of recent decades have recognized the centrality of reproductive freedom to any other meaningful kind of economic, political, or personal freedom for women. Yet Wattenberg, with offhand ease, is apparently ready to jettison these hard-won achievements, and to do so with no apparent recognition of the magnitude of what he is advocating.

To be fair, Wattenberg rejects any overtly coercive solutions to the birth dearth. He repudiates the present-day Rumanian practices for promoting pregnancy, opposes outlawing either

contraception or abortion, and suggests that enthusiastically pro-natalist public education (using three-children-each Jeane Kirkpatrick and Sandra Day O'Connor as prominent role models, for example), could be effective when coupled with some lucrative economic incentives. Among the many possibilities he suggests are much more extensive and less expensive day care, very profitable tax incentives, forgiveness of college loans to child-producing couples, and reorganizing Social Security in recognition of the fact that people who have no children or even one child are "cheating"; they are "free riders" who "end up drawing full pensions paid for by children who were raised and reared — at a large expense — by children of other people" (p. 154). Wattenberg suggests everything from personal ads in *The New York Times* (to destigmatize these possible paths to marriage and children) to kibbutzes in the suburbs without ever advocating anything even approaching the Gileadean model of society.

His perspective, however, is a nationalistic one. His goal, he says, is to preserve and promote precious political and economic freedoms which can only survive if the "free world" remains stronger than the Communist world and than the less developed nations, which are only beginning to absorb the values and benefits of the Western model. If some individuals must sacrifice a little bit of liberty to secure the future of freedom, so be it.

Atwood is also centrally concerned with freedom; how easily it is undervalued (Offred wistfully remembers going to a laundromat with her own dirty garments and her own money in her own jeans pocket, or checking into a hotel room); how quickly it can be taken away (shortly after the coup all Compucounts coded female are cancelled, rendering all women economically dependent in a non-cash economy); and above all, how important it is to watch, as Offred regrets she has not, as Atwood hopes her readers will, for signs of its endangerment.

Here especially *The Handmaid's Tale* brilliantly demonstrates the relevance of good social science fiction to politics. By taking a few parts of contemporary reality, exaggerating them, and extrapolating them into a possible future, readers can see the present more clearly, and the possible dangers in what may otherwise appear beneficent, or at least benign.

### **Implications Of The Two Works**

Read by itself, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a fresh and interesting, sometimes alarming and sometimes amusing, perspective on contemporary events and policies. Read in tandem with *The Birth Dearth*, three implications seem especially noteworthy.



First, the mere fact that the "birth dearth" has climbed high on at least some conservative agendas is important for all political observers and policymakers to recognize. Pat Robertson's attempt in the October, 1987 televised Republican presidential debate to propose a prohibition on abortion as the best way to "ensure the fiscal stability of the Social Security system" was widely dismissed as an isolated bit of idiocy; but references, following Wattenberg, to child-free families as "freeloaders" on Social Security are becoming increasingly common. As further examples of the rising popularity of strategic demography, Jack Kemp has been warning that, "no nation can long remain a world power when its most precious resource (i.e. its population) is a shrinking resource"; former President Reagan's domestic policy adviser, Gary Bauer, has noted that the White House Working Group on the Family turned up "a lot of very worrying evidence on the population decline"; Allan Carlson of the Rockford Institute has taken up the cause of pro-natalism; and Phyllis Schlafly, as quoted at the outset, is proselytizing the necessity for and joys of much larger families.<sup>11</sup>

Thus far, these seem to be only sentiments, but could the increased popularity of strategic demography help to explain the explosive sudden popularity of day care?<sup>12</sup> Does it not seem surprising that federal child care legislation, vetoed so vehemently by President Nixon in 1971 for its family-weakening implications, denounced so thoroughly over the decades by the political right for its communal overtones, has emerged in 1988 as Senator Orrin Hatch's "number one policy issue"?<sup>13</sup> In *The Birth Dearth*, published in 1987, Wattenberg pointed out the strategic value of an issue like day care with the potential for uniting feminists and pro-natalists. Even earlier, in a 1986 interview on the meanings in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood pointed out that:

Any power structure will co-opt the views of its opponents, to sugarcoat the pill. The regime gives women some of the things the women's movement says they want — control over birth, no pornography — but there is a price. . . . Anyone who wants power will try to manipulate you by appealing to your desires and fears, and sometimes your best instincts. Women have to be a little cautious about that kind of appeal to them. What are we being asked to give up?<sup>14</sup>

Presumably, nothing must be "given up" to get good day care legislation. If it is easier for women to work and to have children, women can work more comfortably possibly at better jobs, and also have more children. Still, does it make a difference that at least some recent converts to day care may be less concerned with the welfare of working women than with the number of their progeny? Should a beneficial public policy be rejected simply because the motives of at least some of its advocates may be distasteful? Probably not: but certainly one should be aware of these purposes, and be alert to attempts to advance them.

Especially after reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, a reading of Wattenberg can seem a bit like being parachuted behind enemy lines, an infuriating experience, but also highly instructive. Hatch's proposed day care bill, much like Wattenberg's suggested scheme, has no income test and emphasizes the free enterprise and corporate sector. It does not, as Wattenberg suggests would be even more expeditious (since even working women with day care will probably stop at one or two children) authorize even greater federal funding for women who stay home and have three or four or more children. Others on the right, however, are beginning to suggest that this would be not only the most equitable but also the most progeny-producing policy.<sup>15</sup> How will feminists respond to those who say that *they* are pro-woman and only want to provide equal treatment for those who choose the "traditional" female functions? If feminists want greater economic opportunities for women, can economic opportunities be denied to those who want to be Wives, or even Handmaid's?

The debate over surrogate motherhood has just begun, and has already sharply divided feminists.<sup>16</sup> At least some, however, would argue for the legality of an arrangement under which a woman who desperately wanted her husband's child could freely contract with a willing surrogate, who might find surrogacy much more pleasant and profitable than her other employment options. However, what if surrogacy, and *in vitro* fertilization, gained legal status primarily as part of a national pro-natal policy? If it is acceptable to countenance using a woman's womb to produce children for potential parents who want them, is it more or less acceptable to sue modern technology to increase a nation's population count?

Wattenberg frets that fewer children will mean fewer housing starts, fewer consumers, fewer soldiers, and a weaker national defense: "At an estimated cost of approximately \$300 billion, it (the Strategic Defense Initiative) could be put together only by amortizing it over a large population."<sup>17</sup> Are housing



starts and aircraft carriers less or more valid reasons for surrogate motherhood than personal satisfaction? And if women want their unique reproductive functions recognized and subsidized by a grateful nation, does the public good have more or fewer claims on private reproductive choices? With the Wattenberg thesis fresh in mind, it is somewhat alarming to note economist Sylvia Hewlett approvingly quoting Charles de Gaulle to the effect that "having a child for a woman is a little like doing military service for a man. Both are essential for the welfare of the nations, and we should support both activities with public monies."<sup>18</sup>

This leads to a second important implication of these two works: the line between what is personal and what is political is a very fragile one which must be constantly patrolled. Following fresh upon the nomination and near-confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court of one who insisted that there was no clear constitutional guarantee of privacy, this is surely a timely reminder, and one which feminists in particular may wish to ponder.

One of the earliest and most formidable obstacles which contemporary feminism encountered was a definition of politics so narrow as to exclude many of the issues and concerns of most importance to many women. There was a political sphere, which involved such matters as the Gross National Product and international spheres of influence and partisan realignment, and there was a personal sphere which included such items as childbirth and child-care. Policy-makers, the media, even political scientists, did not "do" the politics of the family, or of rape, or of pornography, or of reproduction. Feminists have worked hard, and successfully, to get certain subjects into the public domain. It is largely due to their efforts that presidential candidates must now seriously address a whole range of "family" issues, that members of the U.S. Congress now regularly debate everything from teenage pregnancy to pre-menstrual syndrome, and that political scientists now schedule panels and sections on gender politics. What these two books suggest, however, is that once "women's" issues are in the public domain, they can become fair game for those who are not sympathetic to feminist aspirations. Feminists may see an obvious distinction between the legitimacy of demands for state entry into family affairs to prohibit and punish spouse abuse but the non-legitimacy of state regulation of maternal treatment of the fetus. Non-feminists may not recognize such a distinction.

Finally, these two predictive works, while focusing on the future, strongly suggest the advisability of remembering the past. There is absolutely nothing new about the concept of pro-

natalism. Most of the world's cultures are now, and have always been, pro-natalist, and this specifically includes America. As the epigrams at the outset were selected to suggest, American women have periodically attempted to reduce and limit the size of their families only to be rebuked for their shameful lack of maternal and patriotic sentiments. The shame-sayers in the past were also nativist, jingoist, and ethnocentric. And, as in the past, white middle-class women are the favored scapegoats.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the political establishment, which of course was white and male, became alarmed over the big-sized families of recent immigrants as compared to the modest-sized families of earlier settlers, and warned of "race suicide". Socialists counter-charged that the call for large families was merely cloaking the capitalists' desire to fill their factories and armies.<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman stormed at male hypocrisy:

All this for and against babies is by men. One would think the men bore the babies, nursed the babies, reared the babies . . . The women bear and rear the children. The men kill them. Then they say: We are running short of children — make some more . . .<sup>20</sup>

Despite these and other protests, however, proponents of large families succeeded, temporarily at least, in idealizing them. And they could, of course, succeed again. As often as women have watched the hard-earned gains of periodic feminism swept back in succeeding waves of familialism it is still easy to become time-bound, easy to assume that the contemporary women's movement is some kind of irreversible culmination of long centuries of progress. There is no small irony in the fact that the May, 1988 issue of *Ms. Magazine* styles itself a "Special Mother's Issue," features on front a classic, covergirl mother and serene child, and in an article on "Careers and Kids," highlights three-child Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and five-child Judge Patricia Wald, both of whom temporarily dropped out of the labor force when their children were small. The pro-natal message is everywhere.<sup>21</sup>

Wattenberg himself seems genuinely insistent that coercive solutions to the birth dearth are unacceptable. Never, however, does he explicitly acknowledge what he tacitly assumes: the coercive potential of public opinion. Nor, of course, can he guarantee that those whom he persuades of the birth dearth's dire nature will be so observant of privacy and choice as he would



prefer them to be.

It is often assumed that the biggest barrier to smaller families in years past, and still around the world today, has been the lack of efficient contraceptive methods. In fact however, "Birth control has always been primarily an issue of politics, not of technology."<sup>22</sup> As demographers have documented at length, contraceptive methods are, and always have been, less significant than attitudes in shaping women's reproductive choices.<sup>23</sup> It is these attitudes that Wattenberg very much hopes to change, and that Atwood warns may be very, very malleable.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Theodore Roosevelt quoted in Linda Gordon, *Women's Body, Women's Right* (New York: Grossman, 1976), p. 141. Sinclair Lewis quote from *It Can't Happen Here* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 19. Phyllis Schlafly's remarks from address to Arkansas Governor's School for the Gifted and Talented, quoted in *Arkansas Democrat*, June 24, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Birth Dearth*. (New York: Pharos Books, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Caryn James, "The Lady Was Not for Hanging," *New York Times Book Review*, February 9, 1986, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Cathy N. Davidson, "A Feminist '1984,'" *Ms.*, February 1986: 24-6, esp. 26.

<sup>5</sup>For an analysis of thirty reported abortion clinic bombings between May, 1982 and January, 1985 see David C. Nice, "Abortion Clinic Bombings as Political Violence," *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (February 1988): 178-95. Rumanian pro-natal policies are described in Dirk J. van de Kaa, "Europe's Second Demographic Transition," *Population Bulletin* 42 (1987): 3-57, esp. p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>See Janet Gallagher, "Fetal Personhood and Women's Policy," in *Women, Biology and Public Policy*, ed. Virginia Sapiro (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), pp. 91-116; Lisa M. Krieger, "Fetus definitions create medical, legal inconsistencies," *Arkansas Democrat*, January 27, 1988, p. 7A; and Eve W. Paul, "Amicus Brief in Forced Caesarean Case," *Insider*, February, 1988, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>On workplace restrictions, see Cynthia Ganney, "The Fine Line Between 'Fetal Protection' and Female Discrimination," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, August 24, 1987, p. 11. On toxic wastes, see "Toxic Shipments to Third World Likely to Increase," *Springdale (Arkansas) News*, April 26, 1987. On Minnesota act requiring burial of fetal remains, see "Judge blocks forced fetal burial," *Arkansas Democrat*, August 22, 1987.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Davidson, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup>Ben J. Wattenberg and Karl Zinsmeister, "The Birth Dearth: The Geopolitical Consequences," *Public Opinion* 8 (December/January 1986): 7-13, esp. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Wattenberg, *The Birth Dearth*, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup>Pat Robertson's formula is as follows: "By the year 2000 we will have aborted 40 million children in this country. Their work product by the year 2020 will amount to \$1.4 trillion, the taxes from them would amount to \$330 billion and they could ensure the fiscal stability of the Social Security system." Quoted and criticized by Charles Krauthammer, "Win, place, show ridiculous in politics," *Arkansas Democrat*, February 21, 1988. "The child-free families of today are the freeloaders on social security tomorrow," according to George

Gilder, "Children and Politics," *Public Opinion* 10 (March/April, 1988): 10-11, esp. 11. Jack Kemp and Gary Bauer quoted in Allan L. Otten, "Birth Dearth," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 1987. Allan Carlson's views in "High-Tech Societies Don't Have High Enough Birthrates," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, April 28, 1986, pp. 23-4; and What To Do, Part I," *Public Opinion* 10 (March/April, 1988): 4-6. On Schlafly see n. 1.

<sup>12</sup>On recent popularity of day care, see Barbara Kantrowitz with Pat Wingert, "The Clamor to Save the Family," *Newsweek*, February 29, 1988, pp. 60-61; and Cindy Skrzycki and Frank Swoboda, "Congress Has Discovered A New Problem: Child Care," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, February 29 - March 6, 1988, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup>On President Nixon's veto and past conservative opposition to day care legislation, see Jill Norgren, "In Search of a National Child-Care Policy: Background and Prospects," in *Women, Power and Policy*, ed. Ellen Boneparth (Elms Ford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 124-39. Sen. Orrin Hatch statement made on McNeil-Lehrer News Hour, January 7, 1988.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in James, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup>Carlson, "What To Do, Part I," p. 5. Mrs. Pat Robertson quoted to this effect in *Arkansas Gazette*, March 2, 1988.

<sup>16</sup>See Robyn Rowland, "Technology and Motherhood: Reproductive Choice Reconsidered," *SIGNS* 12 (Spring, 1987): 512-28.

<sup>17</sup>Wattenberg and Zinsmeister, pp. 9-10.

<sup>18</sup>Sylvia Hewlett, "What To Do, Part II," *Public Opinion* 10 (March/April, 1988): 7.

<sup>19</sup>Gordon, pp. 140-45.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Gordon, p. 145.

<sup>21</sup>See Edith Fierst, "Careers and Kids," *Ms.* 16 (May, 1988): 62-64.

<sup>22</sup>Gordon, p. xii.

<sup>23</sup>Richard L. Clinton, "Population, Politics and Political Science," in *Population and Politics*, ed. Richard L. Clinton (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1973), pp. 51-71, esp. pp. 54-55.